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Juliet's Answer

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JULIET'S ANSWER

The shift supervisor let us go out at midnight to yell at the city. I rummaged through the drawers in the break room and found a large metal serving spoon. I took the spoon outside and swatted it against our beige concrete building. It made a sound like a steady drip of aluminum falling to the sidewalk.

Lance shouted a single vowel noise, his voice breaking and falling off at the end of each breath. Firecrackers in the distance — kazoos. The city's surveillance helicopter sliced the sound of night and noise into circular sections above us.

We attracted the attention of some revelers at the Sheraton, eight stories up, and they waved and we waved back. One of us, probably Lance, breathing hard and scraping the words out of his mouth between vowel noises, said, "Look, they think we're homeless." They were drinking up there, champagne, somebody said it must be champagne, sure, they were getting drunk. All I could think was how cold it was. Man was it cold.

Here's the best part: Juliet, the new girl, jumping and shouting Happy New Year, then kissing me, laughing and jumping in front of me, still shouting Happy New Year. She smelled like spice cologne, and her teeth were sweet sugar, a cold thin kiss, and she kept laughing, so I licked my lips as she turned away, as she turned in a circle, happily toward the sky. She danced in a circle, her arms spread out and she sang the words to Auld Lang Syne, but she didn't know the words so she made them up.

"Happy New Year," I said, but nobody heard me.

The shift supervisor leaned against the corner of the building and watched us. His hands stayed in his pockets and he didn't make a noise. When it was time to go back to work he disappeared inside the building, and we stood out there for just a few more minutes, the starless night hovering above us. The clouds were up there somewhere, and it might snow they said, the sky seemingly wide open with the possibility of snow, and at the same time, as long as there was no snow, just the cold and the night. The sky seemed to be slowly falling down to pin us onto the street.

Murray hadn't left his workstation and was still taking orders, slamming one into his terminal as we came back inside, and he didn't seem to notice that the rest of us smiled temporarily. Murray had volunteered to stay inside and cover for everyone, claiming that he hated New Year's anyway. He wore his head-set like a crown and rattled questions to callers, but there were only a few callers that night, a New Year's Eve night, everyone else out drinking, getting drunk, driving home or passing out on somebody's carpet. When we returned to our seats, Murray took a five-minute break to go outside and smoke a cigarette, but then he came back to his computer and waited for the next caller, and he didn't look even a little bit happy that this was a new day, a new year, that today we could really get started on something if we set our minds to it. He didn't look at any of us or talk to any of us, even though the phones were deadly quiet by now, and there was nothing else to do but talk to each other.

Finally I had to say something, because I couldn't stand it anymore, but all I said was, "Hey, you missed it. Juliet kissed me."

"That's nothing," he said. "I just had a woman

call and ask what brand of underwear I was wearing.”

“No shit,” I said. “What did you say?”

“I don’t wear underwear,” said Murray.

Every day at lunch time Murray went outside and smoked. I went outside with him to shoot the breeze and enjoy the cold night air and let the ache in my head fly back out through my eyes. Murray said he couldn’t have a proper lunch time at three o’clock in the morning. He said it wasn’t right that the supervisor always took an hour lunch and could do whatever he damn well pleased. The supervisor skipped his breaks so he could take an hour lunch, but we never talked about it this way, because it seemed healthier to ignore the facts and stand around crying about it.

I wondered about the supervisor and if he had to wake his wife when he got home. Did they have sex, or did he actually eat something? The supervisor was younger than the rest of the people on the shift, except for Juliet. She would be going to college full-time except her parents wouldn’t pay for it, so she was working here and taking classes. She was young, but sometimes you could forget she was young because she acted at least as old as the rest of us — sort of wise, intelligent, and sometimes I think she just put up with us because she had to, or because we were interesting somehow, like an ant farm.

The supervisor being so young, he was probably in bed with his wife right then, during lunch, naked to the sweat on his back, shouting something at his wife, something he would have to forget about once it was over so he wouldn’t feel stupid, and I pictured the whole thing in my head and started laughing. That bastard might even take a fifteen minute nap.

Lunch had just started when the woman from the day-shift, the small one with the cocoa hair and the porcelain teeth and the wandering eye, the one with winter-tanned legs and the black miniskirt came right into where Murray and I had just started talking, still in the lunch room, because Murray couldn't find his matches, and she said, "I want proof," waving a finger at him back and forth as if to hypnotize Murray into doing what she wanted.

I said, "This is the one?"

Murray had talked about the day-shift woman sometimes, about her wandering eye, and her lovely face, a chin like the seat of a bicycle (this was his description, not mine, but now that I was looking at her, it seemed to fit) and her tiny body he could practically keep inside his pocket. I'd never known which one she was until just then. Murray said she was like no woman at all. She was like an animal, some mistake in the workings of evolution. Beautiful, but wild. "Way back," he'd said, smiling, "some women might have been like her." His smile went away, and he talked for a few minutes into his headset, then said to me, "I've got to stop seeing her, though."

"Why?" I said. "Jesus, she sounds like a dream to me. What's the deal?"

"I don't know," he said. "Something's wrong. I don't trust her. If you knew her, you wouldn't trust her either."

"Trust — who cares? You aren't going to marry her or something."

I took a call then and forgot about it. Murray had been meaning to break it off with her for weeks, then months, but never seemed to work up the energy to do it. Finally one day he broke it off with her and he came in looking like a dried up mud patty.

"She took a swing at me," he said.

"No way," I said.

"She hauled off and hit me and if I hadn't moved a little I'd still be on the ground moaning. As it was she got the side of my head and I've got a headache like someone is in there chipping away at my brain with a pickax."

"You did the right thing," I said.

Now she was in the lunchroom, and Murray stared at her. She didn't look like much. She didn't look like she could hit you hard enough to knock you down. Everyone who had shown up for work — except the supervisor, now probably relaxing, rolling onto his back, patting his wife on the stomach, giggling maybe, or sighing — everyone was watching Murray and the day-shift woman. Seven of us. Murray moved his head from side to side, and touched his chin with his fingertips, stroked his chin. I could hear his whiskers softly scratching against his fingertips.

The day-shift woman said, "I want proof that is wasn't you."

"I gave you proof and then some," said Murray.

From the back of the lunchroom came stifled laughter and it was Juliet and Lance back there yucking it up, and I was pretty sure they weren't eating any lunch; they were making jokes about what was going on up here. I glanced back at them and so did Murray. Then Murray looked back at the day-shift woman and smiled.

"How did you get in here?" he said.

She didn't answer, but her wandering eye moved a bit sideways, and I started thinking about some of the other things that Murray told me about her, that sometimes she screamed at him, "Just shut up and take off your clothes." She would scream it loud enough so anyone could hear, and then right in the middle of it all, she would scream again — something about sunflowers, that

she could see the sunflowers, or there weren't enough sunflowers. She'd run at him, when he wasn't looking, and he could hear her footsteps running, coming closer, but he never had enough time to do anything about it, to duck or move sideways, and she'd jump on him at full speed, knocking him over, then start tearing at him or kissing him or pounding on his chest.

"I have this bruise in the middle of my chest," he said. "Every time I think it's going away, she jumps on me again and pounds on my chest. She's driving me crazy."

I thought maybe she was going to jump on him now. It had been a while since she'd done it, since Murray broke up with her over a month ago. He was probably healing nicely. She just stood there, though, gripping her purse, her hands at her side. There was a tear in her wandering eye. At least it looked like a tear to me.

"Don't worry how I got in here," said the day-shift woman. "That's not it. That's not what I'm here to tell you. You start talking now or I'll have to do something. I'll do something to you and you'll regret it. I swear."

She probably had her badge with her and the guard wouldn't think that she was up to something. Murray was just searching for something to say. That was obvious. Just about anybody could get in here if they wanted to. Especially somebody who worked here. Even if it wasn't their shift. It was easy.

The day-shift woman said, "Well you're the only one since October."

"I haven't got it," said Murray. "I told you."

"What is it?" I said. I smiled. Murray looked at me as if I wasn't supposed to ask, wasn't supposed to intrude, wasn't supposed to overhear. But the whole room was overhearing, so I looked at the day-shift woman instead, and she was just about coming out of her

pants in anger, and she hissed quietly, "Are you afraid of something? Are you afraid of me?"

She was looking at her purse now. She had something in there that she was fumbling for.

"It's a lie," said Murray.

And after Murray said, "It's a lie," the day-shift woman pulled out this tiny little gun and put it right up into his face and said, "Tell me the fucking truth!"

Murray didn't move, except his eyebrows hiked up just a bit, and the day-shift woman started turning purplish red and I thought she might explode. She had a bunch of tears on her face all of a sudden. Her hand was too tight on the pistol. Anybody could see that. It looked for a minute like she might actually do it. She was going to shoot him and he'd drop right to the floor and probably die there, in the damn lunchroom of this lousy company, and that was really no way to die. I could imagine her killing him right there, pop, the little gun flashing into his face, then I could see her jumping on him and pounding on his chest like Murray said she always did, as if all she wanted now was to see him bleed and hurt and die, his life disappearing into an ugly gray carpet, and then we'd maybe have to see the blood stain there every day when we came to work, and we'd all quit our jobs, the seven of us, one by one, because we couldn't stand to remember the New Year's Day that Murray died in the lunchroom.

"I'm not afraid to die," she said. "I'm not afraid." She lowered the gun a little now, pointed it right at his neck. "Are you afraid, fucker?" she said.

Right then what I kept thinking was how attractive the day-shift woman was, with her wandering eye, wonderful to look at, a true peach, just washed, scrubbed clean, a drop of water still hanging there, but bitten into — yes, exactly that seductive. The gun was the only prob-

lem, of course. Put the gun down and stop making a scene and I'll take you somewhere and make you happier than you were with Murray. Wait and see.

The day-shift woman dropped her hand down and brought it up quick and hit Murray square on the side of the head with the gun. I thought it might go off, but it didn't, and Murray just stood there, holding the side of his head. The day-shift woman turned around and disappeared. She disappeared so quickly and so finally, that I wondered if she had actually been there at all, except in my mind I could still hear her telling Murray that she wasn't afraid.

Murray said, "She's lying about that shit. I know it."

I went over to the coffee pot and poured a cup of coffee. I put sugar in it.

Murray said, "She's drunk. I don't have anything and neither does she."

I sipped the coffee. It was sweet and bitter all at once. I walked over to where Juliet giggled and Lance gave me a "shove off" look, but I was pretty sure Juliet thought Lance was a moron. I leaned on the table and asked Juliet what she thought was so funny. She didn't answer, but just looked at me in an awful way.

I said, "There's this restaurant I found. It's called Prosito. Will you go with me? Maybe tomorrow?"

I didn't hear myself ask it, but I knew I had.

She looked surprised, and I could still feel her lips on mine from our New Year's Eve noisemaking, and I couldn't think right then, especially with her sitting right in front of me, her face there close to mine, almost closer than it had been when she'd kissed me. The older memory of Juliet's kiss began to join with the new memory of the day-shift woman, her tears, her body, the gun, with the imagined memory of Prosito Ristorante &

Espresso, dark and haunting coffee, green tablecloths and plastic flowers, lights dim precisely at 7 p.m., antipasto, lasagna, hands touching across the table. It all blustered through and around me like a morning lust; please don't say a word, just take my desire from me, I'm afraid to die.

The supervisor walked in, quickly striding toward us, and I thought he was going to say something directly to us — to me even — but he looked confused, as if he didn't know exactly where he was, and maybe a little angry.

He wasn't supposed to be back yet. He knew that. We all knew that. He stopped, looked around the break room, poured some coffee into a water glass and grabbed two packets of aspirin out of the medicine cabinet. He swallowed the aspirin in a gulp, and then he left again, out to the control room to sit at his desk.

"Shit," said Murray, "I got those tests."

Murray laughed softly. He put his hands in his pockets and looked down at his pants and moved his hands around inside, searching. He said, "I got matches here somewhere." I watched him dig matches out of his pocket — though they hadn't been there before — and cigarettes out of his coat. He walked past me, stopped, and smiled as if dumb. He put his hand on my shoulder and squeezed, then continued outside to smoke.

I stood there, leaning over the cool white table, waiting for Juliet's answer.